DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 336 724 CS 010 705

AUTHOR Hatch, J. Amos
TITLE Out from between a Rock and a Hard Place: Whole Language in Tennessee.
PUB DATE May 91
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association (36th, Las Vegas, NV, May 6-10, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Basal Reading; Classroom Environment; Educational Change; Elementary Education; Higher Education; *Inservice Teacher Education; Pilot Projects; Teacher Role; *Whole Language Approach
IDENTIFIERS *Tennessee

ABSTRACT

The Whole Language Pilot Project in Tennessee was designed to respect teachers' judgments, to assume that their current practices are effective given the circumstances in which they work, and to offer whole language principles and practices as alternatives for teachers' consideration. The major vehicle for helping teachers understand whole language possibilities was a series of monthly teleconferences broadcast over satellite television during the 1989-90 school year. Participation in the pilot project was voluntary, and 40 schools chose to sign on as pilot schools. Faculties from other schools also viewed the broadcasts, bringing the total number of educators participating in the year-long project to over 1,300. The project's approach concerning basals was to help teachers conceptualize a continuum of possible uses for their basals, then to encourage them to reflect on the outcomes they desire and to select from possible uses based on what they wish to accomplish. The project suggested to teachers that there are many advantages to moving in the direction of using more flexible (rather than structured) classroom time and a wide variety of options for grouping children. The project offered teachers a broadened perspective on skills instruction and evaluation that attempted to balance principles of whole language with concerns for skill mastery. A continuum of strategies (incidental teaching, unit teaching, strategic teaching and direct teaching) was presented to teachers. Teachers were encouraged to make active decisions based on their best professional judgment about what was taught, when, and how. Treating whole language learning among professional educators as a transaction rather than as a one-way transmission reduces the chances of placing teachers between a rock and a hard place. (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED336724

Out from Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Whole Language in Tennessee

J. Amos Hatch
Associate Professor
Curriculum and Instruction
216 Claxton Building
University of Tennessee
Knoxville, TN 37996

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
International Reading Association,
May 1991, Las Vegas

CS010705

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
J Amos Hatch
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Out from Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Whole Language in Tennessee

When I was asked by the Tennessee Department of Education to serve as consultant/instructor for their Whole Language Pilot Project, I agreed to do so on the condition that the project would not contribute to what Peter Mosenthal (1989, p. 629) calls "the problem of placing teachers between a rock and a hard place." Mosenthal argues that whole language proponents often place teachers in a paradoxical situation when they insist that teachers use whole language approaches to teach in settings where expectations for students and teachers continue to be driven by accountability concerns and standardized tests. Teachers in such settings become responsible for accomplishing what may be impossible: to satisfy the requirements of conflicting educational philosophies.

The approach we have taken in the Tennessee project is to respect teachers' judgements, to assume that their current practices are effective given the circumstances in which they work, and to offer whole language principles and practices as alternatives for teachers' consideration. Ours is not an all or nothing approach and we recognize that our position makes some whole language "purists" uncomfortable. Nonetheless, we have worked hard to give teachers a solid notion of what whole language is all about, then offered alternative implementation strategies based on a step-by-step approach to change, and tried to find ways to support teachers as they gradually try out whole language practices in their classrooms.

The major vehicle for helping teachers understand whole language possibilities was a series of monthly teleconferences broadcast over satellite TV during the 1989-90 school year. I prepared scripts and sent camera

crews to schools to capture classroom examples of the ideas I was describing in each month's program. Monthly topics included: creating whole language environments, integrating the language arts, thematic unit planning, resources and evaluation, skills development, emergent reading, writing development, and implementing whole language in real classrooms. Each program featured a live call-in segment during which teachers who had been videotaped demonstrating whole language practices were in the studio to answer questions and explain their ideas and experiences. Teachers participating in the project were sent readings to go with each broadcast, encouraged to become immersed in high quality children's literature, invited to keep a reflective journal of their experiences in the project, and given a range of suggested activities to try out in their classrooms each month.

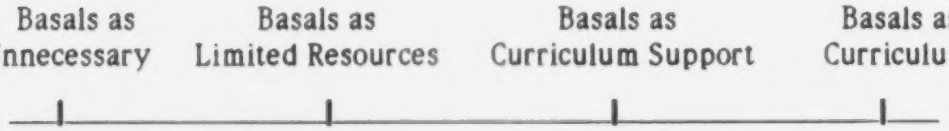
Participation in the pilot project was voluntary. The model was for school faculties to sign on to the project and participate as a group in the first-year training experiences. An initial set of 12 schools quickly grew to over 40 as word of the project spread. Many individuals from schools which chose not to sign on as pilot schools joined pilot faculties for viewing the broadcasts, sharing ideas and concerns, and taking and giving support. In all, over 1300 educators participated in the year-long experiences, 160 selecting to take the training for graduate credit.

What follows is a brief descriptive sample of ways key issues in whole language implementation were handled in the Tennessee pilot. The specific purpose is to give others interested in moving in this direction a framework for encouraging teachers to look closely at the advantages of whole language without squeezing them between a rock and a hard place. It is also hoped that the example this project provides will help state agencies, school

districts, and individual schools think more constructively about implementing change of any kind.

Basal Readers

Many whole language advocates take the position that if teachers' basal reading texts are not locked in the closet, never to be seen by children, the classroom is not truly a whole language setting. Our approach is to help teachers conceptualize a continuum of possible uses for their basals, then to encourage them to reflect on the outcomes they desire and to select from possible uses based on what they wish to accomplish. Teachers tell us that publishing companies have responded to educators' demands by including more high-quality children's literature in new basal series. We draw out these possible uses for the improved basal texts:



We recognize that for some of our participants (especially those who have been doing whole language for some time) basals are not needed. These teachers use children's literature and other textual materials, including environmental print and student-produced text, in ways that make the use of a basal simply unnecessary. On the other end of the continuum, some teachers (many of them new teachers) rely on their basals as the essential reading curriculum. We try not to point a finger at these teachers and say, "You are a bad teacher (or a bad person) if you rely too heavily on

the basal." Instead, we seek to move teachers to the left on the continuum by pointing out the advantages for children's learning, understanding, and enjoyment of using the basals in ways that support curriculum goals decided upon by teachers or treating basals as limited resources in classrooms in much the same ways encyclopedias, trade books, and other forms of text are used (see Goodman, 1986).

Classroom Time

The organization of classroom time can also be represented in ways that help teachers see that there are no absolute right or wrong answers to complex educational questions. Classrooms are different, teachers are different, communities are different, school expectations are different, and students are different. Good teachers accept differences and adjust elements such as classroom time in order to accomplish as much as possible within their unique teaching contexts.

In our discussions, we divide time into flexible and structured time and argue that there are many advantages to moving in the direction of using more flexible time in whole language classrooms. We suggest that teachers who are scheduling their instructional time in traditional, subject-oriented ways (e.g., reading--9:00 to 10:30; spelling--10:30 to 11:00) try a three-step sequence for moving in the direction of allowing children more time to be engaged in ongoing and necessarily time-consuming language activities. Step one is to keep traditional reading groups going but open up the time for students not meeting with the teacher. Reading groups are seen as an anchor by many teachers considering whole language. We suggest that, even if they chose to maintain their reading groups, it's a healthy positive step to give students choices instead of limiting what they do to the usual

"seatwork" (workbook pages, boardwork, and dittos). Choices for students might include: planning and working on projects, personal reading, journal writing or other personal writing, center activities, library time, partner reading, or any number of activities that engage students in meaningful interaction with language and content and give them enough time to complete what they have begun.

Step two is to divide the day into scheduled and flexible time, blocking off a portion of each day for whole language activities and holding the rest for more traditionally organized instruction. We ask teachers to consider rationally the advantages of moving in the direction of flexible whole language time. The third step is, of course, to schedule all or most of the day in an integrated way based on flexible time. Asking teachers to change the fundamental ways they use time in their classrooms is a major request. Our experience and the testimony of many whole language teachers tell us that going from one extreme to the other without gradual transitional steps will never work. Giving teachers solid information, genuine alternatives, and ongoing support is a much better strategy.

Grouping

Moving away from traditional ability grouping patterns is another direction we see as important to whole language instruction. Our approach here is to help teachers explore a wide variety of options for grouping children. The notion is to break the pattern of thinking that the most effective means (usually, in fact, the only means considered) of grouping children is by ability as measured on a standardized test or an instrument that accompanies a textbook series . Adapting from the work of Dorothy Strickland (Cullinan, Farr, Hammond, Roser, & Strickland, 1989), we identify

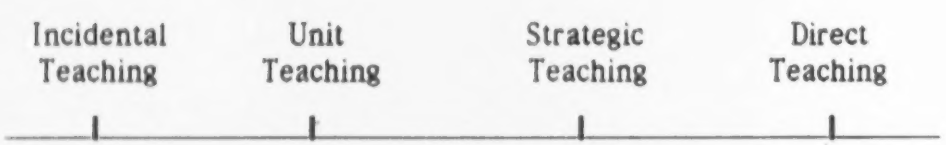
seven alternatives to ability grouping: (1) Whole group instruction--for reading aloud to children, creating large group experiences stories, author's chair and other opportunities for student sharing; (2) Interest groups--for children with shared interests in particular topics (the solar system, ancient civilizations), types of books (mysteries, science fiction), or authors (Robert McCloskey, Judy Blume); (3) Research groups--for working on long-term projects requiring planning, reading, studying, writing, and reporting; (4) Tutorial groups--for allowing students from other classrooms as well as their own to help students with learning tasks; (5) Partner groups--for short term paired reading or longer term project work; (6) Special need groups--for when small numbers of students are identified by the teacher as needing instruction in a particular area (as when several students demonstrate in their writing that they need information about the use of quotation marks); and (7) One-on-one groups--for individual conferences when the teacher listens to a child read from books the child has selected, discusses books the child has read, or helps make plans for future reading. We present these as examples of alternative ways of thinking about grouping for instruction and encourage teachers to try out or adapt several of the strategies.

Skills Instruction and Evaluation

Like most states, Tennessee has taken a skill-based approach to instruction and evaluation over the past several years. Teachers know that their students' performance on state and national tests is of prime concern to school officials, state lawmakers, and the public. State curriculum materials are organized into objectives according to grade levels and teachers in Tennessee, like those in other states, feel pressure to insure that skills specified by the state are mastered (see Hatch & Freeman, 1988).

When teachers perceive that they are caught between a rock and a hard place, skills instruction and evaluation are the places where the rub is most acute. They know that expectations from the state remain and that school administrators and parents continue to evaluate their effectiveness using criteria that do not match up well with whole language processes or outcomes (see Taylor, 1990).

Our approach is to accept the reality of this dilemma and try to help teachers deal with it in the real world of their classrooms. The Department of Education provided some relief by making the use of state end-of-year tests optional for whole language pilot schools. In our training, we offer a broadened perspective on skills instruction that attempts to balance principles of whole language with concerns for skills mastery. It is axiomatic in whole language that isolated skills instruction fragments learning and distorts meaning and purpose. Our goal is to help teachers see that skills in and of themselves have no inherent value; skills are important only because they enable students to become more effective users of language. Our continuum of strategies for skills teaching includes four levels:



Incidental teaching occurs when teachers respond to "teachable moments" as these spontaneously occur in the classroom. This kind of instruction is neither random nor haphazard; teachers give children opportunities to use language in all its forms and observe them doing so, offering feedback and guidance that move children forward in their language

development. This is the opposite of teaching skills in isolation. When a child needs to know how to use skills like "main idea" or "sequence" to make their writing make sense or to understand the writing of others, that is the time when such learning is most likely to be successful.

We offer unit planning suggestions that include holistic (using a webbing format) and linear dimensions. The State Department provides lists of objectives for all subject areas organized by grade levels. These, we suggest, can be used in planning thematic units so that certain skills are targeted for instruction within the meaningful context of a literature- or content-based unit. For example, a second grade study of wild animals might include unit teaching related to skills like using the library and reference material, understanding measurement and the relative value of numbers (comparing sizes and weights of animals), and map reading skills (locating animal habitats).

Strategic teaching means identifying specific skills needed by specific individuals or groups and taking the students aside for small group instruction. Skills that are especially difficult or important may qualify as those that need strategic teaching. Again, teachers and students should be aware that the purpose of meeting in groups to address specific skills is to help students become better communicators and every effort should be made to imbed the instruction in meaningful contexts.

By direct teaching, we mean whole group didactic instruction in which the teacher presents the skill objective, describes the skill and its importance, demonstrates the skill, and has students practice while the teacher gives feedback (see Rosenshine, 1986). We remind teachers that direct teaching is based on different learning assumptions than whole language teaching and suggest that when they use direct instruction exclusively they are working

counter to whole language principles and objectives. We present direct instruction as an efficient tool for teaching basic skills, skills of the type that are tested and for which teachers are held accountable. We are straightforward in acknowledging that the use of strategies all along the continuum might be appropriate during different parts of the day, with different content, for different children, during different parts of the year (for example, the days just prior to end-of-semester or end-of-year testing might be dominated by more direct and strategic teaching). We encourage teachers to make active decisions based on their best professional judgement about what will be taught, when, and how. In addition, we devote an entire program to providing teachers with alternative evaluation strategies designed to document children's genuine progress in acquiring and using language and other skills.

Summary

Change is difficult and threatening for everyone, teachers are no exception. Teachers have different levels of understanding of whole language and different levels of commitment to implementing it in their classrooms. Teachers are competent professionals who are doing a difficult job under difficult circumstances. These premises guided our thinking as we began the Tennessee Whole Language Pilot Project. Our goal was not an overnight transition from traditional to whole language practices, but to help teachers understand the basics of the whole language philosophy and encourage them to move one step at a time in a positive direction. We believe that by framing different strategies as points on continuums, offering many alternatives from which to select, and valuing teachers as able decision makers, we are providing whole language training that is consistent with

what we believe about the learning process in general. We are using what Monson and Pahl (1991) call a "transaction model" of staff development that is consistent with the whole language principles we are encouraging teachers to apply. We are confident, based on feedback from hundreds of teachers, that whole language will have a major place in Tennessee schools. We hope that by treating whole language learning among professional educators as a transaction rather than as a one-way transmission we reduce the chances of placing teachers between a rock and hard place.

References

Cullinan, B. E., Farr, R. C., Hammond, W. D., Roser, N. L., & Strickland, D. S. (1989). Teacher's strategies book. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Goodman, K. (1986). What's whole in whole language? Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Hatch, J. A., & Freeman, E. B. (1988). Who's pushing whom? Stress and kindergarten. Phi Delta Kappan, 70, 145-148.

Monson, R. J., & Pahl, M. M. (1991). Charting a new course with whole language. Educational Leadership, 48, 51-53.

Mosenthal, P. B. (1989). The whole language approach: Teachers between a rock and a hard place. The Reading Teacher, 42, 628-629.

Rosenshine, B. (1986). Synthesis of research on explicit teaching. Educational Leadership, 43, 60-69.

Taylor, D. (1990). Teaching without testing. English Education, 22, 3-74.